

UTAH

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Contents

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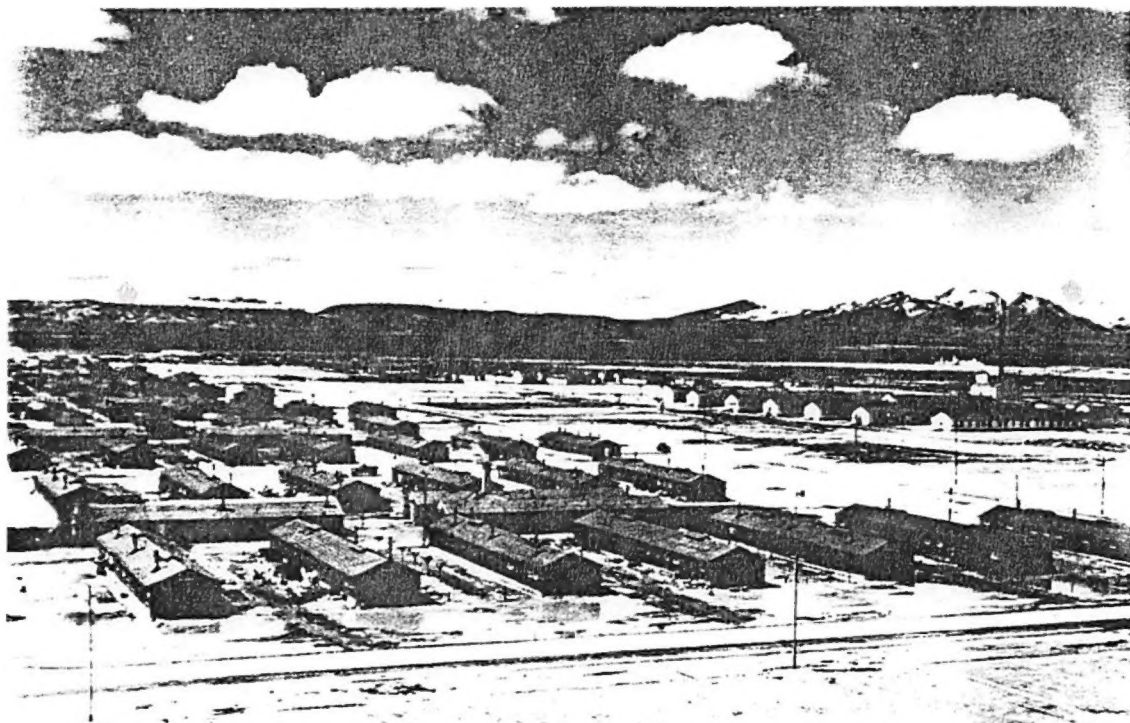
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THE COVER *At play or at work Utah's children were typically American: the barefoot boy with a stick fishing pole and the dressed-up children with their store-bought toys (George Edward Anderson photographs, courtesy Brigham Young University); the Boy Scout tuba player in an LDS church MIA band, Rowland Hall girls playing basketball, and coal miners age fourteen and over at Scofield (USHS collections); the Christian Otteson girls at a daily farm chore in Huntington (George Edward Anderson photograph, courtesy Rell G. Francis, Heritage Prints).*



Postcard view of Topaz. Courtesy of the author.

Topaz, City of Dust

BY YOSHIKO UCHIDA

IT WAS DECIDEDLY NOT BY CHOICE THAT I happened to spend eight months during World War II living in a cluster of dusty barracks located in the middle of Utah's bleak Sevier Desert. This unhappy circumstance occurred because I was one of several thousand Japanese-Americans incarcerated by our government in Topaz, Utah, one of ten wartime concentration camps established to house the Japanese uprooted from

Ms. Uchida is a professional writer living in Berkeley, California. This article is excerpted from a book in progress.

the West Coast of the United States. This mass evacuation, without trial, was the result of Executive Order 9066 that was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in February 1942 and placed 110,000 Japanese, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, under guard and behind barbed wire. Deprived of our constitutional rights as well as our privacy and our dignity as human beings, we were guilty of nothing more than that we resembled the enemy in Japan.

Until the war, my parents, older sister, and I lived in Berkeley, California, where I grew up and went to school. My father was an executive of Mitsui and Company, a Japanese business firm in San Francisco. Only hours after the Pearl Harbor attack, the FBI came to apprehend my father, and for three days we had no word where they had taken him. When he was finally able to contact us, we learned that he and hundreds of other Japanese businessmen and community leaders were to be sent to a prisoner of war camp in Missoula, Montana.

My mother, sister, and I were left behind in Berkeley to cope with the mounting anti-Japanese feelings (fed by long years of anti-Asian sentiment in California) and to face mounting rumors of a mass evacuation of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. The nightmare of evacuation became a reality in April 1942, and the U.S. Army gave us ten days' notice to get out of the home in which we had lived for fifteen years.

Allowed to take only what we could carry, we were shipped along with 8,000 Japanese of the San Francisco Bay Area to the Tanforan race track. There, for six months, we lived in a horse stall formerly occupied by a single horse. Shortly before we left, my father was released "on parole" from Montana and was able to join us in camp.

In September 1942 we were shipped by train to a concentration camp which we knew to be somewhere in Utah and was called Topaz. We had no idea how long we would be there. As the train approached our destination we watched the landscape closely, hoping it would give some indication of what Topaz would be like. We felt cautiously optimistic as we reached the town of Delta, for the land did not look too unfriendly or barren.

We were counted as we got off the train and then transferred to buses for the final leg of our journey to Topaz. As we rode along, we felt fairly hopeful, for we were passing pleasant little farms, green fields, and clusters of trees. After a half-hour, however, there was an abrupt change. All vegetation stopped. There were no trees or growth of any



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kind except clumps of dry greasewood. We were entering the edge of the Sevier Desert some fifteen miles west of Delta, and the surroundings were now as bleak as a bleached bone. Beyond the desert there were mountains rising above the valley with great majesty, but they were many miles away. The bus made a turn into the heart of the sun-drenched desert and there in the midst of nowhere were rows and rows of squat, tar-papered barracks sitting sullenly in the white chalky sand. This was Topaz, Utah.

As the bus drew up to one of the barracks, we heard the unlikely sound of band music. Marching toward us down the dusty road was a group of young Boy Scouts who had come with the advance contingent, playing bugles, trumpets, and drums and carrying signs that read, "Welcome to Topaz—Your Camp." It was a touching sight to see them standing in the burning sun, covered with dust and making such a determined effort to lessen the shock of our arrival at this bleak desert camp. A few of our friends who had arrived earlier were also there to greet us. They tried hard to look cheerful, but their pathetic dust-covered appearance told us a great deal more than their brave words.

We went through the usual arrival procedure which consisted of registering, having a brief medical examination, and being assigned living quarters. Our family was to occupy Apartment C of Barracks 2 in Block 7. Henceforth our address would be 7-2-C. Topaz, Utah.

The entire camp was divided into forty-two blocks, each containing twelve barracks constructed around a mess hall, a latrine-washroom, and a laundry. The camp was one mile square and eventually housed 8,000 residents, making it the fifth largest city in Utah.

As we plodded through the powdery sand toward Block 7, I began to understand why everyone looked like pieces of flour-dusted pastry. In the frantic and hasty construction of this barracks city, every growing thing had been removed, and what had once been a peaceful lake bed was churned up into one great mass of loose flourlike sand. With each step we sank two or three inches, sending up swirls of dust that crept into our eyes and mouths, noses and lungs. After two long sleepless nights sitting up on the train, this sudden encounter with the sun, the glaring white dust, and the altitude, made me feel weak and lightheaded. Just as I was on the verge of collapsing, we finally reached Block 7.

Each barracks, one hundred feet in length, was divided into six rooms for families of varying size, and we were assigned to a room in the center, about eighteen-by-twenty feet in dimension, designed for occu-

pancy by four people. We found that our room contained nothing but four army cots without mattresses. The inner sheetrock walls and ceilings had not yet been installed, nor had the black potbellied stove that was left standing outside our door. Cracks were visible everywhere in the siding and around the windows, and although our friends had swept out our room for us before we arrived, the dust was already seeping into it again from all sides.

The instruction sheet advised us not to put up any shelves until the carpenters arrived from Tanforan to install the sheetrock walls. It also indicated that there would be flush toilets and individual basins (rather than the tin troughs of our former camp) in all washrooms. When I went to inspect these facilities for our block, however, I discovered that there were no seats on the toilets, no water in the laundry, and no lights in the showers or latrines. Our water was being pumped up from nearby artesian wells almost 1,000 feet deep, and twice during our first day the water was turned off completely.

We returned to our room after lunch in the mess hall, and although our mattresses had not yet been delivered, we were so exhausted we spent the rest of the afternoon sleeping on the springs of our army cots. The temperature in our room the next morning was well below freezing, and we soon discovered that the temperature variation in a single day could be as much as fifty degrees. Some days started at thirty and soared by mid-afternoon into the eighties and nineties, so although we wore winter wools in the morning, by afternoon it became imperative to change to summer clothing. When my sister and I would meet some of the incoming buses in the afternoon, we would come home parched, sunburned, and feeling like well-broiled meat.

Although evacuees continued to arrive each day, the blocks to which they were assigned were progressively ill-equipped to house them. People who arrived a few days after we did found gaping holes in the roof where the stove pipe was to fit, latrine barracks with no roofs at all, and mattresses filled only with straw. Those who arrived still later did not even have barracks to go to and were simply assigned to cots set up in empty mess halls, laundries, or the corridors of the hospital. Many evacuees found themselves occupying barracks where hammering, tarring, and roofing were still in progress; and one unfortunate woman received second degree burns on her face when boiling tar seeped through the roof onto the bed where she was asleep.

I experienced my first dust storm about a week after we arrived. The morning had begun cold and brittle as always, but by afternoon a

strange warm wind began to blow. I was in another block walking home with a friend when the wind suddenly began to gather ominous strength. It swept in on great thrusting gusts, lifting huge masses of sand from the ground and flinging them in the air. The sand quickly engulfed us and soon completely eclipsed barracks that stood only ten feet away. We dashed into the nearest laundry barracks, but even inside the building the air was thick with dust. The flimsy structure shuddered with each blast of wind, and we could hear objects being lifted from the ground and flung against the building. During the hour or more that we waited, there were moments when I was gripped with terror. I thought surely the barracks would simply fly apart and we would be flung into the desert. When at last the wind let up a little, we decided to try to get back to our own barracks. As I ran the wind blew sand into my eyes and nose. I was breathing dust and my mouth was gritty with it. When I got to our room I found my mother sitting alone in a dust-filled room. She did not know where my father and sister were, but we hoped they were safe somewhere. There was no point in trying to clean our room until the wind stopped blowing, so my mother and I shook out our blankets, lay down on our cots, and waited for the storm to subside. It was a long afternoon, and the wind did not die down until long after the sun had set.

As mornings and nights grew colder, we looked with increased longing at the black iron stove that stood uselessly outside our barracks waiting for work crews to bring it inside and connect it. One day, almost a month after our arrival, a work crew composed of resident men appeared and finally installed our stove. We were now reasonably warm in our quarters, and our food was beginning to improve. The correlation between good food and rising spirits was, I discovered, pathetically simple.

By now my father, sensing the tremendous needs of the struggling community, had volunteered to serve on several committees, two of which worked on the complex problems of employment and housing in camp. He was also an active lay leader of the interdenominational church, and when the camp canteen was converted into a consumers' cooperative, he was elected chairman of its first board of directors.

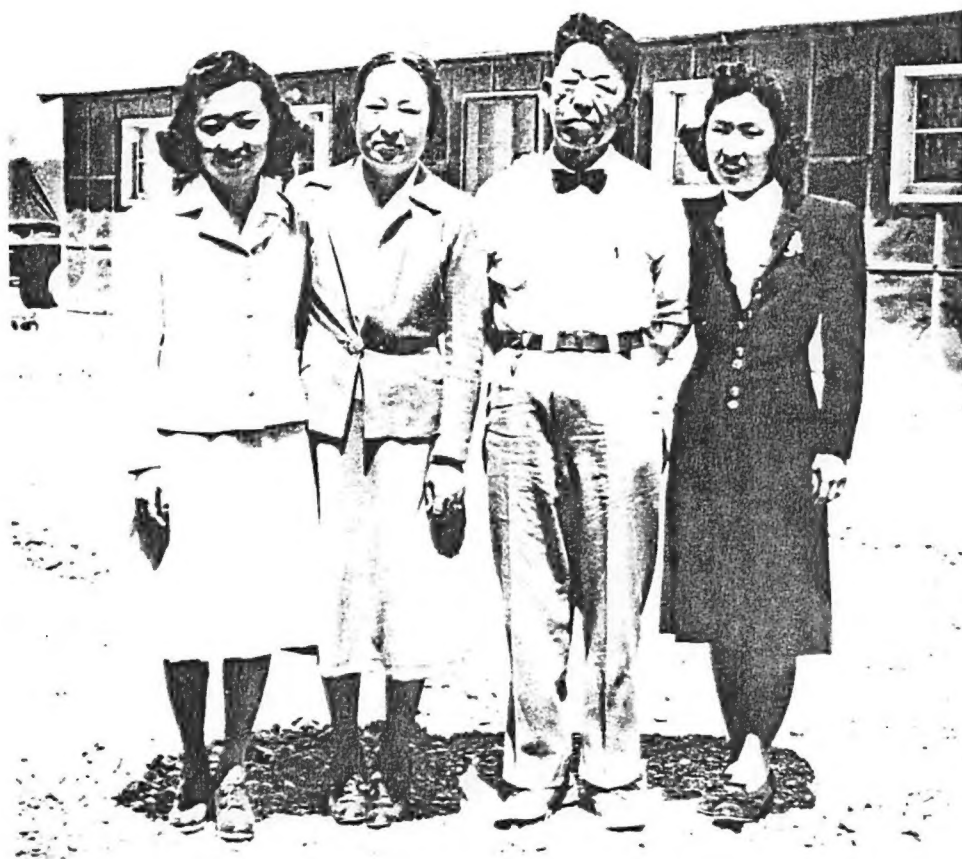
My mother, in her own gentle and quiet way, continued to be a loving focal point for our family, converting our dreary barracks room into a makeshift home where we invited our friends as we did back in Berkeley. Having been a close family, ours did not disintegrate, as many did, from the pressures created when entire families were confined to living in a single room.

My sister, Keiko, utilized her training in preschool education at Mills College in Oakland, California, to establish a "nursery school system for Topaz as she had done at Tanforan, and I applied for work in the Topaz elementary school system. We both earned a salary of \$19 a month for a forty-hour week, while workers in most other categories earned \$16.

Blocks 8 and 41, located at opposite corners of camp, were designated as the two elementary school areas, and when I went with one of the white teachers employed at Topaz to inspect Block 8, we discovered that the school barracks were absolutely barren. There were no stoves, no tables or chairs, no light bulbs, no supplies, no equipment of any kind. The teacher invited me back to her quarters to write up our report, and I was surprised to see how comfortable a barracks could be when it was properly furnished. Until I had seen her comfortable, well-furnished quarters, I had not realized how much I missed our home in Berkeley, and I thought of it with more than the usual longing as I walked back to our room in Block 7.

I was assigned to register children and to teach at the school in Block 41, located at the opposite end of camp, farthest from the Administration Building. All the teachers there were resident Japanese, while the white teachers were all assigned to Block 8, close to the Administration Building and to their own home barracks. When we went to inspect the barracks of Block 41, the situation was even more alarming than had been the case in Block 8. There were large holes in the roof where the stovepipes were to fit, inner sheetrock walls had not been installed, floors were covered with dust and dirt, and there were no supplies or equipment for teaching. I wondered how we could ever open schools under these conditions, but registration of the children proceeded as scheduled Monday morning, October 19. Because it was so cold inside the barracks, we set up tables outside in the sun and registered the children there. The following day we had to send the children home because the barracks were still unusable and there were no supplies or equipment for teaching. On Wednesday the barracks still remained untouched, although construction of the watchtowers and the barbed wire fence around the camp was proceeding without delay.

It was impossible for the children to sit inside the unheated barracks which retained the nighttime temperatures of thirty and forty degrees. We tried moving our classes outside, but the feeble morning sun could not dispel the penetrating cold, and after half an hour we sent our



The Uchida family: Yoshiko, mother, father, and Keiko (sister). Since the internees were not allowed to have cameras, this photograph—probably taken when the two sisters left Topaz—may have been made by one of the non-Japanese residents of the camp. Courtesy of the author.

children home once more. It was finally decided that the daily teachers' meetings would be held in the morning and classes shifted to the afternoon when the barracks, though still incomplete, would at least be warmer.

Before the inner sheetrock walls were installed at school, we had a severe dust storm that brought to a head a crisis that had long been brewing. About noon, gray-brown clouds began massing in the sky, and a hot sultry wind seemed an ominous portent of a coming storm. There was no word, however, that schools would be closed. Shortly after lunch, I started the seven-block walk to Block 41, wrapping my head in a scarf so my nose and mouth were covered as well. Before I was halfway to school the wind grew so intense I felt as though I were caught in a